



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A NEGLECTED NOVELIST.

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

IF a novel be the presentation of an individual conception or vision of the universe, and valuable in as far as it is true and complete, one often wonders why, instead of feeding upon the frothy and superficial productions which issue each month in such copious flow, fresh and ink-dripping, from the press, people should not turn back to the more leisurely and carefully created expositions of a past generation.

It is difficult to speak of George MacDonald as a mere novelist. He was so much of a man, a prophet, a preacher, a seer, that, when one thinks of him, his novels fall into the background, and one remembers his eager and serious pursuit of his Father's business; his childlike simplicity and gentleness; his poetic and prophetic insight into life and character; his power over the weak, the erring, the despairing; his wonderful gift of beautiful living. For those who remember his face and knew his voice, his novels may seem an inadequate expression of his attitude towards life, limited and enclosed, as they must necessarily be, by environment and existent conditions; and not until that reaction from the sterner and narrower forms of Calvinism fades a little further and becomes less immediate fact and more history, can he take his rightful place amongst the Victorian novelists.

Apart from any other consideration, the bulk of his work is very great. He wrote, besides his novels, some of the most fascinating and charming volumes for children that exist in the English language. There are few books indeed that stand beside "At the Back of the North Wind," "Gutta Percha Willie," "The Light Princess" and "Curdie and the Goblins" in charm and dignity and valuable interpretation of life for the little folk.

As a poet, he is not to be overlooked; and certain stanzas of "The Diary of an Old Soul" and some of his Christmas carols are unique in their simple, direct and beautiful expression of the soul's relation to its Creator. But, despite the fact that there are critics by no means to be despised who have spoken of him as the successor of Wordsworth, and who have compared him to Tennyson, his medium was, nevertheless, that of a flowing, unpremeditated and poetic prose rather than measured language, and he was a better discerner of the quality of poetry, as witness his *England's Antiphon*, than he was a poet himself.

To posterity, then, who can no more know him as a personality, he must be handed down as a novelist, and his vision of the world must be reconstructed from "Robert Falconer," "Sir Gibbie," "David Elginbrod," "Donal' Grant," "Malcolm," etc. Yet, in reading these books, it is well worth while to remember that their author lived his ideals before he set them down. The disheartening sensation that we are dealing with the vagaries of a dreamer, a man who, living apart in the world of the writer, has set tasks for other folk to do, must first be cleared away. His simplicity, his charity, his self-denial were unstinted, his sense of the brotherhood of man, of the very underlying unity of all souls in one human soul, which is the foundation of goodness, was secure; and his zeal to find and to serve a Supreme Master was an unquenchable fire. From middle age on, he suffered from extreme ill health; during his visit to America, in the seventies, he was frequently entirely incapacitated; but his courage, his patience, were alike indomitable. In one family where he visited several weeks during that American tour, he was known as the "long baby," because the children, accustomed to a very active and energetic father, were surprised at seeing him almost all day on the lounge or the bed, cared for by his wife or son. He accepted the title with his usual quick understanding of childish conceptions, and for some years he was in the habit of sending communications "from the Long Baby to the Little Babies." There was a deeper truth in the nickname than the children or the owner perhaps realized. George MacDonald retained to the end the childlike heart, the unsophisticated consciousness, the single-minded search for truth and goodness. He was entirely without conventional compromises.

His novels, then, are presentations of the ideal life as he con-

ceived it, rather than a photographic description of life outside himself. He had to an unusual degree external vision, powers of perception and observation; but the main trend of all his novels is to present a theory of life, a justification, literally, of God's ways to man, an explanation of evil, a possible way of weaning man from despair and misery. Compared with Thackeray, MacDonald is very much a spiritualist, with the stress of emphasis laid entirely on the relation of man to his Maker; compared with that other great ethical novelist, George Eliot, his theories are more elaborated and more definitely religious and anthropomorphic. Indeed, if one reflect upon it, it is strange to think how much other-worldliness he managed to weave into the web of his stories and yet keep them concrete and firm upon the earth.

This quality of concreteness, so necessary to the novelist, the quality which, indeed, gives the novel its body and power of conviction, comes out most in MacDonald's delineation of the old-fashioned Scotch peasant character, and in his descriptions of village and country life. How minutely observed, how keenly characterized, was old Mrs. Falconer with her calm forehead and erect carriage, her soft hands and precise dress, the little wooden stool upon which her feet always rested, her stern benevolence and slow recognition of rectitude.

"She wore a plain cap of muslin lying close to her face, and bordered a little way from the edge with a broad black ribbon, which went round her face, and then, turning at right angles, went round the back of her neck. Her gray hair peeped a little way from under this cap. A clear, but short-sighted, eye of a light hazel shone under a smooth, thoughtful forehead; a straight and well-elevated, but rather short nose, which left the firm upper lip long, and capable of expressing a world of dignified offence, rose over a well-formed mouth, revealing more moral than temperamental sweetness; while the chin was rather deficient than otherwise, and took little share in indicating the remarkable character possessed by the old lady."

A living type of an old-fashioned Scotch Presbyterian, her dealings throughout are in line with her appearance—her stern, ungracious but reliable charity, her yearning love for the erring son, and her heart-broken prayers to the awful Deity whom yet she worshipped.

Over the lost son she prayed:

"O Lord, could na he be eleckit yet? Is there nae turnin' o' thy decrees? Na, na, that would na do at a'. But while there's life there's

houp. But wha kens whether he be alive or na? Naebody can tell. Glaid wad I luik upon's deid face, gin I cud believe that his soul was na amang the lost. But eh! the torments o' that place! and the reik that gangs up forever and ever, smotherin' the stars, and my Andrew doon i' the hert o't crying! O Lord! I canna say 'Thy will be doon!' But dinna lay it to my chairge; for gin ye was a mither yersel' ye widna pit him there!"

Then, when the false news of the son's death came, she sent to the school for her grandson Robert. When he entered the room she greeted him with:

"Close the door, Robert. I canna let ye gang to school the day. Ye maun lea' him oot noo."

"Lea' wha oot, Grannie?"

"Him, him, Andrew—yer faither, laddie—I think my hert 'll brak."

"Lea' him oot o' what, Grannie? I dinna understan' ye."

"Lea' him oot o' oor prayers, laddie, an' I canna bide it."

"What for that?"

"He's deid."

Then, a few days later, when Robert, reading the daily chapter, came upon Christ's words, "I pray not for the world," she said, "*He* was o' the world, and if Christ wadna pray for him, what for suld I?" For the theology to which she subscribed had a great power of hardening the heart.

This theology, with its terrors of Hell forever at hand, its tendency toward hardening character in a set and, however upright, yet an unlovely mould, was the condition which produced all of George MacDonald's novels. Against a background of stern Calvinism he has set some character who interprets God as the God of love and mercy. In the first of his novels, David Elginbrod himself is the wise and canny interpreter of God. David is a grand Scotch peasant-king, as the novelist calls him, and supposed to have been a descendant of the German mystic, Jacob Boehme. He is also the descendant of that Martin Elginbrod who had the "some fearsome" epitaph written upon his own tombstone:

"Here lie I, Martin Elginbrod;
Hae mercy o' my soul, Lord God,
As I wad do, were I Lord God,
And ye were Martin Elginbrod."

To the liberal and emancipated thinkers of to-day there is nothing shudderingly irreverent in this demand upon the Creator

to live at least up to a human standard of kindness; but, to the stern upholders of the stern and wrathful God of Israel of that time, it seemed a very daring appeal. The clergy of those days were more concerned for the justice and glory, than for the mercy and love, of God. A churchgoer then "wad hae heard a heap about the glory o' God, as the thing that God Himsel' was maist anxious aboot uphauding; jest like a prood crater o' a King; an' that he wad mak' men, an' feed them, an' clee'd them, an' gie them braw wives an' toddlin' bairnies, an' syne damn them, a' for's ain glory."

To combat this theory of a merciless God damning men "a' for's ain glory" was then the theme of novel after novel. David taught Margaret and Sutherland the wisdom and love of God, and these went out into the world, smoothing the pathway, unknotting the tangles, clearing away the evils and ameliorating the tragedies of life wherever they went with their acquired light. In "Robert Falconer," the communication is more direct, and Robert wins to the surety that love can conquer and rule the world, out of his own doubts and griefs, and then presents his more enlightened theology against the sterner and older order of his Grannie. In "Sir Gibbie," the little dumb boy was born an heir to the kingdom of light, and from the beginning he knew no life but that of love and service. An exquisite conception is that of the little cherub, Sir Gibbie, growing up in the streets of the city, uncared for, living like the sparrows on chance crumbs, yet, under the protection of Providence, the self-appointed guardian of all drunkards. Out of the love he had borne for his drunken father, he developed a perfect passion for playing guardian angel to drunk folk.

"If such a distressed human craft hove in sight, he would instantly bear down upon and hover about him, until resolved as to his real condition. If he was in such distress as to require assistance, he never left him until he saw him safe in his own door. The police asserted that wee Sir Gibbie not only knew every drunkard in the city, and where he lived, but where he generally got drunk as well—that one was in no danger upon whom Sir Gibbie was in attendance, to determine, by the shove on this side or that, the direction in which the hesitating, uncertain mass of stultified humanity should go. . . . He was least known to those to whom he rendered the most assistance. Rarely had he thanks for it, never halfpence, but not infrequently blows and abuse. . . . A certain reporter of humorous scandal, after his third

tumbler, would occasionally give a graphic description of what, coming from a supper party, he once saw about two o'clock in the morning. In the great street of the city he overhauled a huge galleon, which proved, he declared, to be the provost himself, not exactly *water-logged*, and yet not very buoyant, but carrying a good deal of sail. He might possibly have escaped very particular notice, but for the assiduous attendance upon him of an absurd little cock-boat, in the person of wee Gibbie. . . . Round and round the bulky provost gyrated the tiny baronet, like a little hero of the ring, pitching into him, only with open-handed pushes, not with blows, now on this side and now on that—not after such fashion of sustentation as might have sufficed with a man of ordinary size, but throwing all his force now against the provost's bulging bows, now his overleaning quarter, encountering him now as he lurched, now as he heeled, until at length he landed him high, though certainly not dry, on the top of his own steps."

In each book there is one simple person to whom the meaning of life, or, better, the philosophy of MacDonald, has been revealed, as in "Sir Gibbie" to the little baronet who had the reputation of being "not a' there," and to the old peasant woman Janet, who had gotten "so far above time and chance that nothing really troubled her, and she could wait quietly." She and Sir Gibbie were tarred with the same stick. As the canny farmer said, "They'll dee weel eneuch i' the ither warl', I doubt na, whaur naebody has to haud aff o' themsel's." No one has applied more continuously and consistently than has MacDonald the Socratic dictum that "no evil can befall a good man." Janet and Sir Gibbie, David and Robert perfectly exemplify this truth. If we sometimes smile at the anthropomorphic turn of the phrases, we who chiefly feel of the creative force that "His ways are not as our ways," we must at least admit that MacDonald's religion is identically the religion of all mystics in all time, and that his interpretation of life must stand or fall with the yogis of the East, Plotinus, Jamblicus, Proclus, Boehme, Tauler, "the little poor man" and a host of other illustrious lovers and believers. His intimacy with his Lord and Creator was as theirs, he spoke to Him more frankly, more often, than to any earthly friend. Janet never used the word "prayer"; she spoke of it as "holding the gate open." "O Lord," she prayed when she believed her husband to be drowning in the great floods, "Gin my bonnie man be droonin' i' the watter, or deein' o' cauld on the hillside, haud's han'. Binna far frae him, O Lord. Dinna let him be fleyt." For to her, not death, but the fear of death, was evil, for fear

was faithlessness. The presence in thought of the eternal good was to her the only reality, and was more and better than life, nay, was *life* itself.

"The one secret of life and development is not to devise and plan, but to fall in love with the forces at work—to do every moment's duty aright—that being the part in the process allotted to us, and let come—not what will, for there is no such thing—but what the eternal thought wills for each of us, has intended in each of us, from the first. If men would but believe that they are in process of creation and consent to be made—let the Maker handle them as the potter his clay, yielding themselves in respondent motion and submissive, hopeful action with the turning of His wheel—they would ere long find themselves able to welcome every pressure of that hand upon them, even when it was felt in pain, and sometimes not only to believe, but to recognize, the divine end in view, the bringing of a son into glory."

His theory of evil is that of all mystics; it is the finite mind that cannot see the whole, and mistakes the helpful and beneficent process for an end in itself, instead of the soil which must be the food of the flowering. Life was to him the waking of the human soul to knowledge of itself in the mirror of its thoughts and feelings, its loves and delights, seeing Nature reflected by slow filmy unveilings, in the mirror of humanity, her highest self.

In the attitude towards the visible world once more we find MacDonald's was the mystic's consciousness—the great love of space, the sense of spirit in the winds and storms, the love of trees and flowers, shade and sunshine, stars, waves, even the black interstellar spaces as the habitation of spirit, the visible garment of the Creator. To wee Sir Gibbie "a cold wind, a small forsaken solitary wind, moist with thin fog" was a friend to be met as he wandered about corners at night, and to be pitied because it seemed an aimless wanderer, while he was about the blessed business of serving. The very rocks and heather and the faces of the sheep reflected Divine Love.

"He would sit, motionless as a ruined god of Egypt, on a stone of the mountainside, islanded in space, nothing alive and visible near him, perhaps not even a solitary night-wind blowing and ceasing like the breath of a man's life, and the awfully silent moon sliding up from the hollow of a valley below."

The projection of the soul into the nature around, and nature's power to relieve the soul in turn of the narrow confinements of self, he knew well:

"When a man turns to look at himself, that moment the glow of the loftiest bliss begins to fade, the pulsing fireflies throb paler in the passionate night; an unseen vapor streams up from the marsh and dims the star-crowded sky and the azure sea; and the next moment the very bliss itself looks as if it had never been more than a phosphorescent gleam—the summer lightning of the brain. For then the man sees himself but in his own dim mirror, whereas, ere he turned to look in that, he knew himself in the absolute clarity of God's present thought out-bodying him."

MacDonald's five senses were very unevenly active. The main part of his knowledge and emotion comes to him through the eyes. He *sees* everything. The first few chapters of "Sir Gibbie" are entirely visualized; they describe scenes and people as they are presented to the eyes. It is significant that the opening sentence of "Robert Falconer" is: "Robert Falconer, schoolboy, aged fourteen, thought he had never *seen* his father." Then follow various memories in which he had glimpses of him. This predominance of vision is carried further in the visualized dreams that come to the characters. These dreams are very vivid and significant and definitely seen, as Robert's dream of seeing the tall man, in a blue coat with bright buttons, about to open the lid of the bureau; the little elderly man, in a brown coat and brown wig, who sought to remove his hand; the stalwart figure, in the shabby tartans, with a hand on the head of either of the others; and the stately Highlander, with his broadsword by his side, who laid his hand on the other's arm. Here was the fifth generation watching four generations of forebears, three of them trying to hold in control the evil intention of the fourth. This significance of vivid dreams passes over frequently into warnings and admonitions, and in "The Portent" to marked cases of second sight. A clairvoyant faculty nearly always belongs to an habitual visualizer.

Far behind sight, but second in importance, comes hearing. Despite the love of music, and above all of organ music, the amount of hearing in MacDonald's novels is very small. The sound of the human voice is rarely alluded to. The sounds in nature, taking into consideration the passionate love of the author for the outdoor world, are rarely defined. The singing of the burn occurs several times in "Sir Gibbie," echoes occur twice, but in the wind he notices the freshness and feeling of it against the skin rather than its rushing song. Smell, which plays so

large a part in the sensibilities of the French psychological school, notably in de Maupassant, is almost quiescent. It occurs two or three times when hungry people smell food; and I remember that he brings in the smell of a pine forest in "Robert Falconer," and oddly connects it with the pervasive sense of divine truth, as a thing in itself so invigorating that "some one must mean it." Of dermal sensations he has chiefly the feel of water and of wind against the flesh. Indeed, a large part of all his novels is the health-giving property of outdoor life, of exposure to wind and weather. Many of his educational theories are forecasts of modern well-tested truths.

His diction is overrun with words belonging to the heart—"heart-break," "heart-rending," "heartache," the "heart of a story," "heart of the Father," "love," "tenderness," "mercy," "the everlasting arms," "nestling," "the heart of being," etc.; but the word "mind" and the terms pertaining to mentality are almost lacking. Of his style in general one cannot say that it excels in precision or sophisticated elegance. His sentence structure is loose; his grammar, alas! not above reproach. But when he falls into the strong, sweet speech of his early life, into the Scots tongue, he is simply unparalleled. Epigram, wit, depth of emotion, profound significance and a tenderness such as one might fancy unutterable, flow from his pen. His wealth of moral maxims is not to be overlooked. The books are full of short, pithy bits of concentrated wisdom, as:

"Ilka crater 'at can ates ilka crater 'at canna; but the man 'at wad be a man, he manna."

"The first thing a kindness deserves is acceptance; the next is transmission."

"There can be no better auxiliary against our own sins than to help our neighbor in the encounter with his. Merely to contemplate our neighbor will recoil upon us in quite another way."

"Gin the Lord lat auld age wither me up, He'll luik after the cracks Himsel'."

"A word is a word, but its interpretations are many; and the understanding of a man's words depends both on what the hearer is and on what is his idea of the speaker."

"Emulation is the devil-shadow of aspiration."

"The only hope of understanding lies in doing."

Of a kite, Robert says,

"It's queer 'at things winna gang up ohn hauden them down."

When one has said so much of MacDonald, one turns again to question why he is neglected. Compared with the people who are writing novels to-day,—and counting Meredith and Hardy amongst those who have ceased to produce,—he is a very giant amongst pigmies. If his anthropomorphism is somewhat distasteful to a more sophisticated age, it is easily translated into the speech of the purest mysticism. He was to his own age shockingly liberal, and to ours he is amazingly orthodox. When another generation or two shall have passed, certain religious peculiarities will have become historic quaintness, and a fuller appreciation than he has yet had is awaiting him.

His subject is a large one—namely, the coming to consciousness, not of the mind, but of the soul, of man. It is so large a subject that it admits of calm and meditative treatment. There is little or no literary cleverness, tricks, manners and gesticulations. If one call up Falconer or Elginbrod to mind, one remembers them large, patient, slow of movement and speech, but with no small nervous habits of body, like Deronda's grasping of his coat collar. Sir Gibbie, indeed, being wholly a spirit of love, into whom no notion of suspicion or hatred had ever entered, was in the habit of dancing for joy; but, in the main, the large characters are conceived theoretically and abstractly; they stand for a given frame of mind rather than a bodily attitude or gesture. In dealing with the Scotch peasant, the whole method is changed, and is concrete and realistic, and full of that wealth of detail which rises at the slightest touch of the spring which opens the door and lets in the flood of early memories.

The rare beauty of MacDonald's novels is their gift of wide horizon and repose. From the clever, mannered, nervous, swiftly moving stories of our own day, to turn back to his work is like coming out of the heated glare of the theatre into the blessed sunlight and the open meadows.

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.